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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a creative narrative is used to illustrate an episode of flaming (defined as the fervent exchange of messages personally attacking or expressing defensiveness on computer-mediated communication networks) in an electronic mail exchange among a small group of communication scholars. The narrative allows for the presentation of an argument that operates on four levels of signification. It can be read as: (1) an account of an episode of flaming, in which the focus of meaning creation is the transcription of electronic mail messages; (2) a story, with plot, scene, and characters, in which the focus of meaning creation is the narration of social action; (3) a work of interpretive research, in which the focus of meaning creation is the careful analysis and thoughtful engagement of the literature; and (4) an argument for a broader view of scholarship, in which the focus of meaning creation is the effort to position the narrative as a work of legitimate intellectual engagement. Nineteen footnotes are included. (Contains 32 references.) (RS)

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A Creative Narrative

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An Episode of Flaming: A Creative Narrative

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Abstract

This paper offers a creative narrative that illustrates an episode of flaming in an electronic mail exchange among a small group of communication scholars. The creative narrative provides one method for the interpretive study of communication, allowing a scholarly performance that operates on multiple levels of signification. Flaming is a vernacularism used to describe the fervent exchange of messages, often personally attacking or expressing defensiveness on computer-mediated communication networks. The narrative contained in this paper essentially "tells a story" of one episode of flaming, as viewed by one of the participants.

Introduction

What you are about to read is an attempt at creative narrative. As defined by Brown & McMillan (1991), a creative narrative is "a story that is factual in content, but uses fiction writing techniques, including plot, scene and characters" (p. 53). The technique of creative narrative provides one method for the interpretive study of communication, especially as revealed in a culture. Because it enables a scholarly performance that operates on multiple levels of signification, it reflects the "multiple domains of experience" thesis advanced by interpretivist epistemologies (Anderson 1987, 1992, Anderson and Meyer, 1988).

The following creative narrative describes an incident within a culture that is developing in the domain of electronic mail exchanges. The significant event that provides the focus of the story is an episode of "flaming," a vernacularism used to describe the fervent exchange of messages, often personally attacking and/or expressing defensiveness on computer-mediated communication networks.[1] The social action of this episode is revealed in the textual performances of members of an academic computer-mediated discussion forum in sending and responding to electronic mail messages.

This essay may not be typical of much scholarly writing; however, since the "interpretive turn" in the social sciences, this kind of work is finding a wider forum.[2] Recognizing the diversity of opinions as to what constitutes appropriate scholarship within an interpretivist framework, the narrative is presented on at least four levels:[3]

(1) the level of the electronic mail exchange where the flaming occurs, which is presented here in an

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indented sans serif monospaced font,
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(2) the level of the participant's reaction to the flaming, which is presented in the body of the narrative in a Roman typeface,

(3) the level of the researcher's engaging of the narrative within the scholarly literature, which is provided in the footnotes to the narrative, and

(4) the level of the author's attempt to contextualize the creative narrative as a legitimate format for scholarly work, which is provided in the introduction and conclusion to the narrative.

Thus, how one navigates through these levels while reading the narrative has implications for the meaning one creates from engaging it.

A central assumption of this approach is that meaning is not something that is transmitted in communication, but rather something continuously created in the interplay between text and reader. Human understanding is not seen as a putative entity determined by an objective reality, but is seen as an inherently subjective accomplishment of social action. This sub-

[1] This definition of flaming should not be seen as conclusive, for there are a number of other definitions in the literature. Baron (1984) included in her description of flaming the characteristics of "speaking incessantly, hurling insults, [and] using profanity" (130). According to *The Hacker's Dictionary*, (Steele et al., 1983) flaming means "to speak rabidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude." Kiesler et al. (1984) define flaming as "the practice of expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings" (1130).

[2] See Geertz (1983) and Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) for a closer look at this shift toward the greater currency of interpretivist scholarship in the social sciences, and Goodall (1990) for a discussion of the interpretive turn in the communication discipline. A few examples of this type of research in the communication discipline include Brown and McMillan (1991), Goodall (1989a, 1989b, 1991) and Pacanowsky (1983, 1988).

[3] This multi-level approach is similar to the format outlined by Pacanowsky (1989). His suggested outline for the interpretivist narrative included three phases: (1) "engaging the scholarly literature," (2) "being engaged in the field," and (3) "demonstrating the argument."

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jective view of understanding does not exclude the claims to understanding made by scholarly arguments. It is hoped that the narrative form used here provides an effective illustration of this point.

An Episode of Flaming

I sat staring at my computer screen. I was dumbfounded by what I saw. My indignation grew as I read and re-read these words of an electronic mail message[4]:

> [B] The only reason for thinking of a relationship as being directional or deterministic is so that you can measure it, and eventually control it.
>
> Sorry, but knowledge/experience/reality in any formulation shouldn't be subjected to that sort of crap.

"Did I say that? I didn't say that! Did I?"

I ask my computer, as if it can hear me. My Macintosh computer sits quietly, the only sound it makes coming from the soft whir of a cooling fan. I know it can't hear me, but often I choose to behave as if it were a mute partner in my private ruminations. As if it were responding to my queries, a slight flicker near the lower edge of the screen momentarily distracts me from the otherwise static display.

"Looks like my power supply is about to bite the dust. Oh well, I can live with the flickers for awhile. Hold on until spring break, okay, Mac?"

Ironically, as if the computer really was listening, the flickering stops...for the moment, at least. I return to reading the latest message I've received on Com-Talk, an electronic mail "discussion list"—a computer-mediated group discussion—where people in our department exchange comments on a variety of topics.[5] Sometimes the discussion gets a bit heated.

"Wait a minute, B.! I didn't say that relationships are directional at all. In fact, I'm sure I said I was skeptical that these relationships exist at all, especially as conceived as directional ones."

No, B. is not the name of my computer, although I speak to it as if it were. For the moment, my mind fixes on the image of B., staring at me through the bit-mapped text that appears on the computer screen. The image is not simply that of B. the professor, but of B., a partner in electronic communication, an "E-mail" correspondent. The image I direct my comments to is not a simple one, but a strange composite, a fused image representing B. in the main, but with a voice delimited by the computer communication system,[6] and an inflection vaguely familiar...as if it were my own.[7]

I scroll back my "peruse buffer," where a few screens back, I begin to trace the "thread" of the conversation[8] to see if I can find the roots of this misunderstanding, this failure to communicate, this flame in the making. It appears to have started with a set of questions on "methods and issues in empirical research," which I had posted to Com-Talk to see if anyone would care to respond to them. B. replied to all of the questions, but his response to question seven (my lucky number?)...

> [P] Which relationship is more difficult to establish, the relationship between knowledge and experience, or the relationship between experience and reality. Why?

was uncharacteristically brief:

> [B] Why do you ask these questions, P.? Experience is knowledge of reality.

Since his answers to the rest of my questions were thoughtful and substantial, I took it that he wanted me to elaborate more on this one, to "unpack" my motiva-

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[4] In this narrative, a bracketed initial is provided next to each electronic mail message, to make it easier for the reader to identify the sender of the message. Other than this identification aid, and the changing of names to initials, the electronic mail messages presented here have not been altered.

[5] All of the electronic mail messages presented here were sent to Com-Talk, as contributions, commonly called "postings," to this computer-mediated group discussion, rather than as private messages.

[6] Shamp (1989) provides evidence for this phenomenon, known as "mechanomorphism," which he defines as "the perception of the computer communication partner as machine-like." He found that "perceptions of computer communication partners were more similar to perceptions of the computer than were perceptions of a person with whom the individual communicated through media other than the computer" (pp. iv-v).

[7] Turkle (1984) offers a fascinating account of how young people, growing up with computers, often creating the image of a "second self" in their relationship with the machine. She provides ethnographic evidence that computer users "find themselves" in the computer, which can lead to "thinking of yourself as a machine" (p. 271). Gratz and Salem (1984) argue that "the relationship between man and computer is basically a self-reflexive one" (p. 100). They describe the computer-human relationship as one of extending the self to incorporate the computer; in this interaction, "the human being is merely expanding the definition of the boundaries of self as a quasi-closed system" (p. 100).

[8] This is not always easy to do. Computer-mediated conversations rarely have discrete beginning and ending points. In electronic mail networks such as Com-Talk, most messages make contributions to the on-going discussion, and often there are multiple topics discussed simultaneously. Ferrara, et al. (1991) describe interactive dialogue via computer networks as an "interactive written discourse" characterized by an "emergent register" (p. 8). Murray (1991) refers to the adoption by computer conversationalists of strategies for managing the "changing goals in a shifting rhetorical context" (p. 47). Holmes (1987) identified some of the "linking strategies" used to manage simultaneous, multiple conversation "threads" in on-line dialogue.

tions for asking it, to give him more of a "handle" on how I perceive the underlying issues. So I tried to do that, in my latest message to Com-Talk:

> [P] In your response to question 7, you ask...
>
> >Why do you ask these questions?
> >Experience is knowledge of reality.[9]
>
> Well, is it B.? or is knowledge an explanation of experience? Does reality exist without knowledge?
>
> I guess my question was aimed at "unpacking" these relationships between experience and reality and between experience and knowledge. It is in part based on my reading of Roth, and in particular the chapter "Knowledge Denatured." Perhaps it is the skeptic in me, but I'm uncomfortable with just assuming these connections.

"Now does that sound like I was saying anything about a directional relationship? Why are you reading between the lines?"

My Mac remains mute, although the flickering is back. I ignore it, as I scroll down to read more of the message I had written.

> [P] J. C. Pearce, in "The Crack in the Cosmic Egg," claims that "there is a relationship between what we think is out there in the world and what we experience as being out there..."
>
> And what is this relationship? To some it may be a deterministic one, where experience of reality shapes knowledge. To others it may be a determining one, where knowledge shapes how we make sense of experience, and thus how we construct reality. And to others it may be a cooperative one, where experience shapes knowledge, and knowledge shapes experience, and reality is the perceived result of this mutuality.
>
> Heck, I don't know the answer. But I liked the sound of the question.

"Well, maybe he thought that these three alternatives were the only ones I would accept, and that my listing of them was in order of preference. But how could B. ignore my admission that "I don't know the answer"? He must be reading between the lines here, making assumptions of my intended meaning based on some of our previous discussion.[10] I find it hard to believe that he could read this message and conclude that I believe there is a relationship, and that I see it as a directional one."

For some reason, my speech has shifted from addressing B., and am back to talking to my anthropomorphized computer. Or have I been just talking to myself all the time? This would have probably been the conclusion if someone were secretly observing this scene; after all, I'm the only one in the room. But my focus of attention seems to shift easily between B. and my computer; I address both, although not quite simultaneously. Of course, B. can't hear me, nor can my computer (not yet anyway). Yet in my mind, my comments have a definite target. I'm talking to a complex constructed image, a fusion of my image of B., the distinguished scholar and one of my favorite colleagues, and of B., the recalcitrant and utopian interpretivist who seems determined to prejudge my messages, and of Mac, my friendly computer who makes this world of fantasy possible, who listens to me without ever challenging me, although the stupid thing keeps burning up power supplies.

The mouse takes a firmer than usual tap from my finger, as I vent my frustrations at being misunderstood while scrolling down to read once more B.'s response...

> [B] Some of the best sounding questions have to be deconstructed for the lurking presence of an ideological principle. In your case, your understanding of the term "relationship" seems entirely directional. I can conceive of relationship in a far

[9] The use of the "greater than" symbol is commonly used in electronic mail messages to highlight text quoted from previous messages or other works that the author is responding to. Some text editors automatically insert these symbols when a REPLY/EDIT command is issued to the computer system. Foulger (1990) calls this usage the "quote/antiquote" style of response, and suggests that it can contribute to the impression that messages are "confrontational even when they are not intended to be" (p. 200).

[10] Murray (1991) noted that the composing of electronic mail messages is influenced by the "personal memory context" of the writer. An important aspect of this context is one's memory of text of previous read messages. Since many users do not have a "hard copy" to refer back to, they often rely on their memory of previous messages in composing new messages. Other possible contributing influences may be the tendency for electronic mail messages to be short (giving the appearance that the message is part of a continuing "conversation") and to refer back to previous messages. The context of a message, then, is substantially constructed from the reader's prior computer-mediated communication experiences. But as Romiszowski and de Haas (1989) point out, these experiences are both "multi-level" (with several concomitant discussion topics) and "multi-speed" (with different participants addressing different aspects of a theme with varying response rates). Thus, the frustration produced by having one's message being read "out of context" may be exacerbated by the problematic nature of context in the computer-mediated communication situation.

> more rock 'n' roll manner, complete with calls and responses, lead rides, a haunting rhythm, and various mood changes. E. urges us to conceive of relationships within the metaphor of dance-some dances, like waltzes, for example, contained both forward and backward steps and many varieties of dips, swings, and turns. Either way, the directional ideologue won't make it. The only reason for thinking of a relationship as being directional or deterministic is so that you can measure it, and eventually control it.
>
> Sorry, but knowledge/experience/reality in any formulation shouldn't be subjected to that sort of crap. You LIVE in experience and call what you make of it reality.
>
> Thank you for raising this issue.

"Thank you for raising this issue," I condescendingly mimic in a nasal falsetto. "Talk about crap. C'mon, B. Quit trying to read me the way YOU want to read me, just so you can get on your soapbox to rail against ideologies."

Perhaps I'm overreacting. I try to calm down a bit, but as I stare at the screen, certain phrases seem to stand out, as if they were in large, bold type:

> **LURKING presence...**
> **YOUR understanding...**
> **ENTIRLY directional...**
> **WON'T make it...**
> **The ONLY reason...**
> **that sort of CRAP...**

My feelings change from anger to frustration to indignation...and eventually, to an anxious feeling of inadequacy, of being soundly defeated in an intellectual game. Perhaps it is my plight to be used by heavyweight scholars as a punching bag for sharpening their polemic right jabs and pilpulous left hooks. I feel like sciolistic scum, whose ignorance has been revealed and rejected with an effortless flick of the great one's thumb.

I may be down, but I'm not defeated. I switch to my word processor, and proceed to craft my defense.

> [P] Talk about the author having no privileged stance with regard to the meaning of his text...[11]
>
> Gee, B., I don't know what made you say my understanding of the term "relationship" is entirely directional.
>
> If anything, I think I was trying to vent my skepticism with assuming the existence of a relationship, ESPECIALLY a directional one. I stated that "I'm uncomfortable with just assuming these connections" (do "connections" mean directional?) and mentioned three possibilities for describing them, concluding with "I don't know the answer. But I liked the sound of the question." Does this sound like someone who has made up his mind that the relationship is "entirely directional"?
>
> What is interesting to me is how I sense "the lurking presence of an ideological principle" in your response, one that seems intent on boxing me into a position where you can exert an oppositional argument (although in this case, I believe, it was not me you boxed in, but a mirror image of your own argument). If I may add to your own words, "the only reason for thinking of [my previous message] as being directional or deterministic is so that you can measure it, and eventually control it." It seems you have already measured my message, and perhaps have exerted your own "control" on its meaning (at least for you).

"Now that should let him know how I feel. More importantly, it will let the rest of the Com-Talk members know that B.'s interpretation of my previous message was off-base. Hey, I've got a reputation, too."[12]

I consider whether I should stop writing at this point, or if I need to say more. Will I be "fanning the flame" if I say more than this? Perhaps, but there is something else bothering me that I want to get off my chest. Although there are at the moment eleven members of the department on the Com-Talk discussion list[13], most of the members have yet to participate.[14]

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[11] This is a reference to Roth's (1987) arguments against meaning realism, and specifically, the "museum myth" view of meaning, where "meanings are determined by what the speaker 'has in mind'" (p. 14). Given the indeterminancy of meaning, there are no "facts of the matter" of a text, and the author of a text has no priveleged stance with respect to its meaning for others.

[12] Romiszowski and de Haas (1989) noted that "people tend to attach certain characteristics to messages, and this leads to differences in the status of participants." One's reputation in a computer-mediated communication situation may be influenced more by the quality (and perhaps quantity) of messages than by external indicators of status.

[13] Since the time of this episode the number of participants has reached 35.

[14] I suspect that part of the reason for this is a lack of familiarity with electronic ma.. systems. One of the problems with using computer-mediated communication systems in

Could it be that some people are afraid of taking the risks of joining the discussion? Perhaps this flaming, these heated arguments that sometimes erupt,[15] have scared some of the more timid types away. I decide to include in my message my personal desire to see a friendlier on-line environment, one where people might feel less threatened. So I continue writing...

> [P] It's a good thing that I have tough enough skin to take a few barbs, (e.g., "that sort of crap") but I really don't want to flame with you on this. I believe that for com-talk to continue, it would be helpful if we try to encourage a forum where people can participate without fear of decapitating argumentation. It may be fun, and is probably an accepted practice within academia. But I think it likely that more people on this line would contribute if there was continuing evidence of a friendly, open forum, where ideas--even the less than "rigorous" ones that might be raised--can be tossed around. I sincerely ask that we try to be open about the meaning of what others write, and not try to read too much "between the lines."

I want to be diplomatic about this...so I add some remarks that I hope will cool down the fever of my message a bit:

> [P] Let me be the first to apologize, as I've been guilty of this at times, and may even be doing it now.
>
> Perhaps it would be best to just drop the reality-experience-knowledge discussion for awhile. But I think there is a lot left to unpack in the statement "You LIVE in experience and call what you make of it reality," and should you wish to pursue this a bit, I would be happy to contribute what I can.
>
> Your friend, P.

The "your friend" close was perhaps a little too sentimental for the occasion, but I wanted to indicate that while I took issue with B.'s tactics, I was trying not to take it personally. Trying, but not entirely successfully.

I hesitated a moment before sending the message. Perhaps I should just say nothing. (No, ignoring it would be suspicious, as I'm one of the most active voices on Com-Talk.) Perhaps I should write a message that praises B. for his insight, and expressing my wish that I hope to be as brilliant as him someday. (No, it would be interpreted as sarcasm, and then we would have a bigger flame on our hands.) Perhaps I should change my tone a bit; maybe I'm being an inconsiderate little punk. (Probably, but I have trouble with being anything less than honest, and for all the faults of this message, at least it's honest.) Perhaps I should send the message to him via private e-mail, rather than keep our exchanges on the public level of Com-Talk. (No, I had felt attacked in public, and I felt a need to defend myself in public.) I sent the message.

As soon as I did, I felt better...and worse. I had said my peace. I took the opportunity that computer-mediated communication provides for democratic participation in discussion, and made what I felt was an important point. But did I do irreparable damage to my relationship with B.? with the other members of the Com-Talk line? Will I be perceived as a hot head? Will my credibility go out the window? What have I done?

Within a few hours, I got a response from B.. The subject line of the message was "Apologies...for what?"[16] I could tell that as far as B. was concerned, I had overreacted, that I took offense where no offense was intended...

> [B] Was it something I said? My intent was to provide an alternative reading of what I perceived to be your deterministic rendering of "relationship." Of the "crap" line, well, I have been hearing that line used about the kind of work I do for a long time now from hard-core quantitative types and I guess it just rubs off. Don't take it personally.
>
> To be a scholar does mean having a thick skin, in my experience. How does one acquire it? By risking self and learning from the experience. I know of no other way.

---

education was identified by Phillips and Santoro (1989) as the "user unfriendly" interface of many campus computer systems.

15 Although the academic environment may inhibit the more egregious type of flaming found in other situations, there is evidence that flaming is not uncommon. In their study of electronic mail users in a large office equipment firm, Sproull and Kiesler (1986) reported that their respondents experienced flaming in electronic mail messages an average of 33 times a month (1508).

16 Subject lines are used in electronic mail to provide the reader with a concise indication of the content of the message, and are similar to the subject lines often used in memoranda. As Foulger (1990) notes, subject lines allow readers to "rapidly find content they are interested in" from a directory of messages. It may be that they also serve to constrain and contextualize a message, placing it for the reader within the topical realm suggested by the description given in the subject line.

These were soothing words. I guess they were what I wanted. I wanted evidence that I wasn't being rejected, that my contribution to the discussion was valued. Yet now I felt pretty low, as if the flame was entirely my fault.

Why had I reacted so defensively? Was it the fear of having my thinking labeled with the stigma of "deterministic"? Was I afraid of being banished to the heartless camp of quantitative researchers? Or was I afraid that the judgment of what type of scholar I am was in fact already being decided for me, that these playful, tentative, shoot-the-e-mail-bull ideas I had expressed were being used to trap me into positions I'm not sure I want to take. Perhaps the real reason for this flame was my own insecurity.[17]

Yet I'm not so sure that there isn't something about the nature of computer-mediated communication that encourages flaming. I may be a little insecure, but I don't think that this is a sufficient explanation for what happened. The lack of nonverbal communication, of being unable to hear inflections and see facial gestures, makes it difficult to detect the emotional content of a message.[18] If, as B. says, he was merely trying to provide an "alternative reading" of my "deterministic rendering of relationship," perhaps my taking offense was in part due to my compensating for the lack of nonverbal by independently creating a multichannel context—substituting my inflection, my facial expression, and my hand gestures into the context I constructed for his message. When he said "deterministic" (one way of looking at things) I may have heard OOH YUCK DETERMINISTIC (a stupid way of looking at things--and you should know better, P.!).

Another possibility may be that people take what they say in conversation more personally than what they write. The experience of participating in on-line dialogue seems to have some characteristics of spoken discourse and some characteristics of written discourse.[19] While messages are textual, they are written in a relatively rapid fashion. Spelling and grammar errors are usually overlooked, not only because of limitations of editing systems, but because of the widely recognized ephemeral nature of the text; the writing is not intended for permanence, but is temporary, part of a shared text-based conversation. Writing a scholarly paper involves careful and thoughtful reflection; writing a brief comment to a computer-mediated discussion may be much more spontaneous, much less pre-meditated. The use of words like "crap," which might be unacceptably crass in more serious forms of writing, may be reflective of a looser, less restrictive view of the role of text in computer-mediated communication.

Yet the conversation analogy may be misleading in text-based interaction, and may lead one to dangerous assumptions about how a message will be interpreted. Individuals in a conversation can make rapid adjustments in meaning through the process of giving and receiving feedback; committing one's "turn at talk" to text in an electronic mail message produces a frozen, static conversational artifact. An on-line dialogue may look like a conversation, but without the opportunity for simultaneous feedback, for synchronous exchange, the appearance may be very misleading. Perhaps the origin of this flame can be traced to the image I constructed of B., that strange composite I referred to earlier, an image I created—perhaps in part to sustain the conversational metaphor in an asynchronous, technologically-mediated form of interaction.

So if there is something to be learned from this episode of flaming, it may be that there are characteristics of computer-mediated communication that can lead to misunderstandings, limitations that are easy to forget, and perhaps forgotten at great peril. J. confirmed some of my suspicions in his comment to Com-Talk...

> [J] Our problem in scholarship as well as in the classroom (and probably elsewhere as well) is to be able to express our passion while still maintaining the relationship in which the passion can be expressed. If as Roth says scholarship is your way of life, it cannot be dispassionate. None of us have the answers folks, which means that we're all as close to the

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[17] Turkle (1984) noted that heavy computer users are often people who have been "burned" in human relationships, "who need to avoid complicated social situations, who for one reason or another got frightened off or hurt too badly by the risks and complexities of relationships" (p. 216). In educational environments, could heavy users of computer-mediated communication be revealing their insecurity at maintaining scholarly dialogue on an interpersonal, face-to-face level?

[18] Blackman and Clevenger (1990) have studied the use of textual surrogates for nonverbal behaviors in computer-mediated communication. They identified twenty-two techniques that computer conversationalists use to compensate for the lack of nonverbal communication, including the creative use of capitalization and punctuation, and the use of pictographs (sometimes called "emoticons," these are icons created from textual symbols, and often must be viewed by turning the head to one side. For example, :^) is seen as a "smiley face" when viewed from the side.)

[19] Baron (1984) offers a theoretical perspective for viewing the relationship (albeit a deterministic one) between computer-mediated communication, spoken discourse, and traditional forms of written discourse. She speculates that computer-mediated communication may influencing speech (by increasing logical and grammatical coherence, but decreasing persuasive content) and traditional forms of writing (by increasing clarity, but also increasing homogeneity of style).

> edge as we can be. When B. calls something "crap" it means that that is the best counterargument he can muster at the time. It's not ontology. I want to be able to say something is crap and the author come back and challenge me to demonstrate my claim.
>
> Remember the limitations of E-mail! Re-invoke our commitment to one another and our scholarship when the pins prick or the pricks pin as the case may be.
>
> Peace and Love, J.

Indeed, there are limitations of E-mail, limitations that may contribute to the phenomenon of flaming. Knowing what those limitations might be, whether they are limitations of system, process, or language, might help those who use computer-mediated communication avoid misunderstandings. It may lead to more sensitive use of one of today's most exciting opportunities for communication in education, and for education in communication.

"It may even lead to peace and love, Mac!"

The flickering screen winks.

Conclusion

The creative narrative presented here allows for the presentation of an argument that operates on a number of different levels of signification. One can read it as a report, considering it an account of an episode of flaming, in which the focus of meaning creation is the transcription of e-mail messages. One can read it as a story, with plot, scene and characters, in which the focus of meaning creation is the narration of social action. One can read it as a work of interpretive research, in which the focus of meaning creation is the careful analysis and thoughtful engagement of the literature. And one can read it as an argument for a broader view of scholarship, in which the focus of meaning creation is the effort to position the narrative as a work of legitimate intellectual engagement.

Such an approach to scholarship does not come without risks. It could be argued that the episode of flaming presented here is not particularly representative of flaming in general, that it does not contain all of the necessary characteristics of flaming, or even that it is inaccurate to call this an episode of flaming at all. It could be criticized for being too personal, for privileging one voice over another, and for not assuming an objective stance toward the data. It could be rejected for a lack of rigor, an inability to replicate, a reliance on the merely anecdotal.

While acknowledging these limitations, I argue that they emanate from a perspective on scholarship that is not claimed by this paper. If the aim of scholarship is the truth, then this paper cannot be seen as scholarship, for it makes no claims to the truth, or more precisely, claims only that it offers one of many possible "partial truths" (Clifford, 1986). What it does claim is that there should be room in scholarship for the normative as well as the descriptive (Anderson, 1992). As Pacanowsky (1989) argues, this kind of humanistic research "is less concerned with the reproducibility of representation, and more concerned with unique values—the goods and bads, the beautifuls and uglies, the shoulds and should nots—of the specific situation under description" (p. 253).

But if truth is plain to see, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. How then can one evaluate scholarship without objective criteria? How do we know if a creative narrative, such as the one presented here, can legitimately be considered scholarship? Madison (1988) offers one possibility. He argues that one can achieve a normative view of interpretive method, one that "far from supplanting personal, subjective judgment or eliminating the need for it, is meant as an aid to *good judgment*" (p. 28). Following the view of phenomenological hermeneutics advanced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Madison suggests a list of criteria such a method might consider. These criteria include **coherence**—details of an interpretation should be in harmony with the whole, **penetration**—the interpretation should display an underlying intention that attempts to resolve a central issue, **suggestiveness**—the interpretation should raise questions which might stimulate further research and interpretation, and **potential**—the interpretation should be capable of being extended beyond itself with harmonious implications (pp. 29-30). Madison cautions against interpreting these criteria as "rules for interpretation," but rather offers them as an articulation of "the practice which is followed, I think, by most interpreters" (p. 31).

Of course, whether this creative narrative achieves success on these criteria, or whether different criteria should be applied, remains a matter of interpretation. And that, I argue, is as it should be, as it must be if what we call scholarship is to grow beyond the limitations of convention. As Goodall (1990) has argued, "we need to begin to chart our exploration of the future, starting with a commitment not to confine that exploration to more of the same" (p. 277). Goodall goes on to assert that:

> The new frontier of communication studies aims at a more general interpretation of meaning as the core of human experience and ways of accounting for meaning as inherent in all communication research. The idea is not to define meaning, but to evoke it; not to claim that it is a source of perfecting discourse, but to admit, outright, that it is imperfect; and not to perpetuate the scientific myth of control, but to advance a post-scientific notion of communication as the process in which and

through which self, other, and context make and exchange meanings. (p. 288)

For research to challenge this "new frontier" suggests a new view of the meaning of research. The question of what constitutes scholarship gives way to the question of how scholarship has constituted itself. The question of the meaning of research gives way to the question of how research is itself part of the process of meaning creation. The question of appropriate method gives way to the question of how method creates an illusion of innocence. And as we persist in asking these questions, new methods of scholarly research, such as the creative narrative method presented here, may provide tentatively satisfying answers to these questions.

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